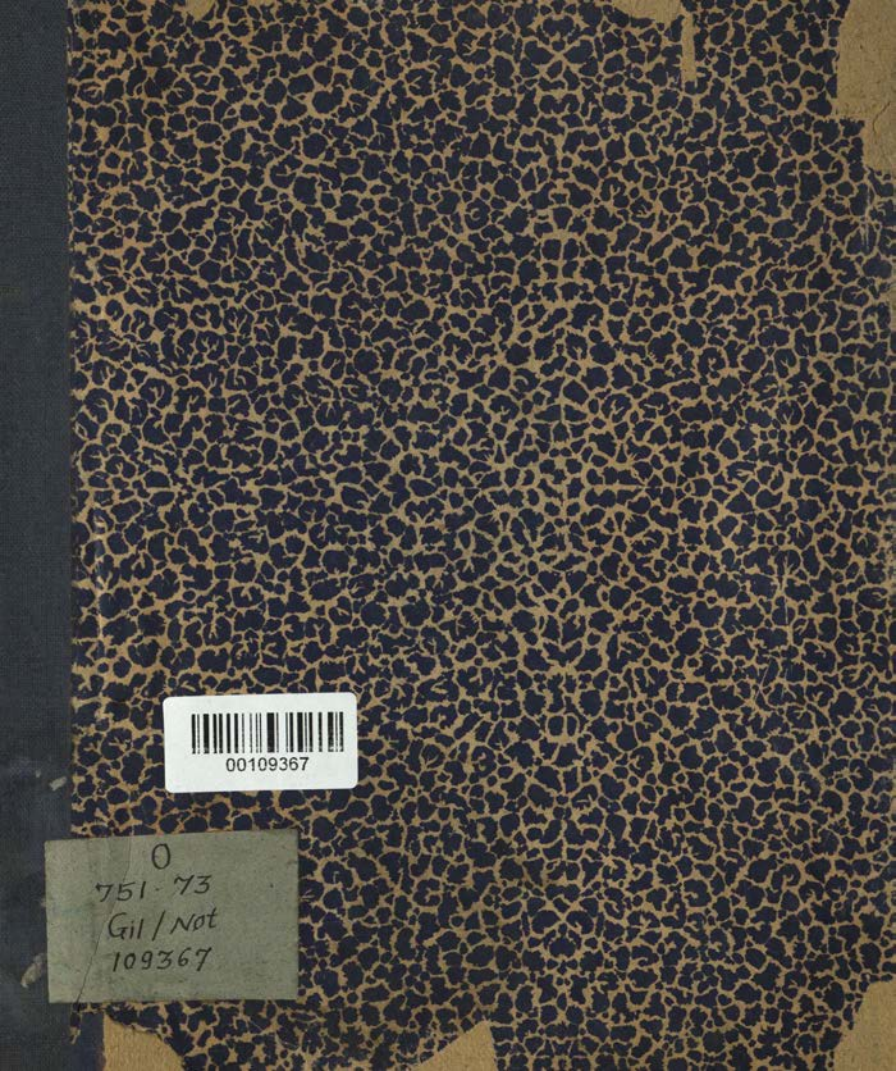

00109367

0
751·73
Gil / Not
109367

THE
ASIATIC SOCIETY OF BOMBAY
Town Hall, Bombay.

Digitized with financial assistance from
Observer Research Foundation
on 22 February, 2019

No 10 of 1877.

76

Old Gill's

NOTES AND ILLUSTRATIONS

OF THE

BUDDHIST CAVES OF AJANTA.

109367

LIBRARY OF THE ROYAL ASIATIC SOCIETY BOMBAY BRANCH

Bombay:
PRINTED AT THE
GOVERNMENT CENTRAL PRESS.

1876.

FB.a.8

751.73
Gil/Not
109367

ROYAL ASIATIC SOCIETY LIBRARY BOMBAY

Old Gill's

NOTES AND ILLUSTRATIONS

OF THE

BUDDHIST CAVES OF AJANTA.

INTRODUCTION.

On the Indhyadri range of hills between the British Province of Khandesh and the Kingdom of Hyderabad, and which separate the valley of the Tapti from the higher table-land of the Deccan, lies the small village of Ajanta, about 300 miles north-east from Bombay and 24 miles north-west from the famous field of Assaye. The celebrated Buddhist Cave Temples are situated about 5 miles to the north-west of the village, in the ravine of the Wagora, a small stream that rises about four miles to the south-east of Ajanta and winds its way northwards into the valley of Khandesh. The entrance to the ravine is at a short distance from the foot of the ghát, on the road leading from Ajanta to the frontier village of Furdapur, from which the caves are about 3½ miles distant. The defile is of considerable width at first, but gradually narrows as we follow its windings up the stream, till at length it suddenly sweeps round to the right through a curve of more than half a circle hemmed in on each side by almost perpendicular rocks, and ends in several waterfalls, the lowest of which may be nearly a hundred feet high, and the rest together about as much more. It is in the concave scarp or outer bend of this *cul de sac* that the caves are excavated, and assuredly this sequestered glen is well adapted by nature for the wonderful works it enshrines. The scenery is wild and grand, and such as Salvator Rosa would have gloried in, and its wild loneliness must have pointed it out to the devotees of Buddhism, nineteen centuries ago or more, as a fitting retreat from the cares of an overbusy world; here alone they might devote their lives to contemplation until life's flame should be extinguished, and admit them to everlasting repose; undisturbed, as they pictured it, by feeling, or care, or dream. Here, amid scenes of nature's primeval activity,—where through long ages water had been exercising its potent energies in cutting a way through the solid rock, toppling down huge masses, and leaving on each side giant scarps, lofty perpendicular walls of basalt,—puny man, longing after immortality, with untiring perseverance and astonishing daring chiselled out of the living rock these spacious chambers that so excite our wonder and curiosity.

The scarp in which the caves are formed, is nearly perpendicular, and about two hundred and fifty feet high; they extend about a quarter of a mile up the stream, and vary in elevation from about 60 to 150 feet above the bed of the torrent, the highest and most difficult of access being at the farthest extremity.

The series consists of 29 caves in all, 5 chaityas or temples and 24 viharas or monasteries; and for the purposes of reference are numbered in order from that lowest down the stream. Of these, 4 chaitya caves and 23 viharas are accessible. I entered the remaining two caves at great risk, hoping, from the very great difficulty of access, to find the paintings within them in better preservation than in the others; but the chaitya I found to be simply a beginning, merely a small portion of the façade,—in fact nothing but the top of the great arch of the window having been completed. Nor was the vihara in a much more advanced state, the verandah only having been fashioned out, supported by six rough-hewn pillars and two pilasters.

Chaitya caves are places of worship, and at Ajanta are usually about twice as long as they are wide, and in height measure almost the same as in width, the back or farther end being almost always circular. The roofs are lofty and vaulted. Some of them have been ribbed with wood, and in others the stone has been cut in imitation of wooden ribs. A colonnade runs round each, dividing the nave from the aisles. The columns in the most ancient chaitya caves are plain octagonal shafts, without bases or capitals; but in the more modern ones they have both bases and capitals, with highly ornamented shafts. Within the semicircular end of the nave stands the daghopa, a solid mass of rock, and either of the simple or composite pattern. The simple daghopa, which is supposed to be the more ancient form, consists of a plain cylindrical base supporting a cupola or dome, which is the essential part, and generally exceeds a hemisphere in height, and which is surmounted by a square capital. Both on the base and cupola of the composite daghopa sculptures are introduced, generally of Buddha and his disciples, and of tiny images of the great daghopa window, and of fret; whilst, above the capital, three small hemispherical canopies, resembling umbrellas, rise over one another, the uppermost uniting with the roof at the junction of the ribbings at the end of the cave.

The front of the cave is formed by a wall or screen varying in height. It is pierced by three doors or a door and two windows, the larger and central opening entering the nave, and the two smaller ones being at the ends of the aisles. Springing from the top of this screen is a large open arch, having a span usually of one-third the total height or width of the cave. There is a verandah in front of one of the chaityas and a portico in front of another, over which are terraces not quite so high as the bottom of the great arch, from which springs a second and outer arch, somewhat larger than the inner one, and having at the foot of it a parapet wall about 3 feet high. These terraces may, perhaps, have been for musicians.

The vihara caves were monasteries containing cells, and are usually of a square form, supported by rows of pillars either running round them and separating the great central hall from the aisles, or disposed (as in cave No. 6) in four equidistant lines. Opposite the entrance of the cave is the sanctuary, invariably occupied by a statue of Buddha; it is usually approached through an ante-chamber, in front of which are two pillars and pilasters running parallel to the back of the cave, in which, as well as on each side, are cells for the cloistered inmates.

All the viharas have verandahs in front with chapels or cells at the ends, and some consist of a verandah only, with cells opening from the back of it.

At first sight there seems to be a want of harmony in the styles of pillars of the colonnades, both of the chaityas and viharas; but closer examination reveals a certain regularity of system: thus in the chaitya caves the columns over against one another, on each side of the nave, correspond in order; and in the viharas the two central pillars in each face of the colonnades are alike, then those to the right and left of them, and so on to the corner ones, all four of which are occasionally of one pattern.

Very few of the caves seem to have been completely finished; but every portion of all of them, except one, appears to have been painted—walls, ceilings, and pillars—inside and out; even the sculptures have all been gorgeously coloured.

Beautiful and varied sculpture covers the whole façade of cave No. 1; but with this exception the sculptures in the viharas are found chiefly round the doorways and windows, and about the openings of the sanctuaries, and are almost exclusively restricted to representations of conjugal endearment, with beautiful frets and scrolls.

In the chaityas the sculpture is confined to the façades in the most ancient caves; but in the more modern ones it is found covering the walls of the aisles, the columns and entablatures, and on the daghopas. It consists chiefly of Buddha or Buddhist teachers in every variety of attitude instructing disciples. The sculpture generally shows but little knowledge of art—indeed, none beyond the commonest rudiments of proportion. The paintings have much higher pretensions, and have even been considered superior to the style of Europe in the age when they were probably executed. The human figure is represented in every possible variety of position, displaying some slight knowledge of anatomy,—so far, at least, as the exhibition of the deltoid and biceps, the pectoral muscles, the recti and the patella are concerned,—and the most desperate attempts at fore-shortening have been made with surprising success. The hands are generally well and gracefully drawn, and rude efforts of perspective are to be met with. Besides paintings of Buddha and his disciples and devotees, there are representations of streets, processions, battles, interiors of houses with the inhabitants pursuing their daily occupations, domestic life, marriage and death scenes, groups of women performing religious austerity; there are exhibitions of the cobra de capello, hunts, men on horseback spearing the wild buffalo, animals—from the huge elephant to the diminutive quail, fish, ships, &c.

The small number of domestic utensils depicted is somewhat remarkable: the common chatti and lota, a drinking cup and one or two dishes, a tray, an elegantly-shaped guglet having an oval bowl and long thin neck with lip and handle, together with a stone and roller for grinding condiments, are all that are observable. The same lack of weapons of war, either offensive or defensive, is also to be noticed. Swords, straight and crooked, long and short, spears of various kinds, clubs, bows and arrows, a weapon resembling a bayonet reversed, a missile like a quoit with cross-bars in the centre, and shields of different forms, exhaust the list. There is also what bears a strong resemblance to a Greek helmet, and three horses are to be seen yoked abreast; but whether they were originally attached to a war chariot, cannot now be discerned.

The paintings have been in the most brilliant colours; the light and shade are very good; and they have been executed upon a thick layer of stucco, in which rice husk is very observable, but whether whilst it was wet or dry is difficult to determine; but in many places the colour has penetrated it to a considerable depth.

By whom these works were executed, is a question which has not yet been satisfactorily answered. I have heard visitors propound the most varied hypotheses as to the race to whose art we owe these sculptures and paintings: they have been claimed for the Italians, the Chinese, the Egyptians. A glance might satisfy any one that they have no resemblance to anything Italian of whatever age, and only in two or three isolated figures do I find aught to remind one of the forms of Chinese art; but both in the paintings and sculptures I think I see much that recalls the old Egyptian style. "The Egyptian statues," says Flaxman, "are generally equally poised on both legs, having one foot advanced, and the arms hung straight down, or one is raised up at right angles with the body; the features are formed of simple curves, and lightly but sharply marked, and with little expression; the general proportions are something more than seven hands high, the form of the body and limbs rather round and effeminate, with only the most evident projections and hollows. Their tunics, or rather their draperies, are in many instances without folds." Does not this correspond with the style of the statues in these caves? Then, again, among the paintings are to be found profiles in the true conventional style of Egypt, and many of the borders, geometrical patterns, and scrolls are almost identical with those figured in Sir Gardiner Wilkinson's account of the ancient Egyptians.

Though probably executed at very different periods, the caves appear to have been all connected with one another by a well-defined passage, and in some places by a covered way, with flights of steps leading up from the bed of the stream, one in front of cave No. 16 and the other in front of cave No. 17.

To save the labour, too, of descending to the river on all occasions, two water-tanks had been formed, one adjacent to cave No. 16 and the other in front of cave No. 26, the former of which, even to the present day, yields abundance of cool, clear, sweet water throughout the year.

But few inscriptions, either engraven or painted, are found about the caves. The painted ones are all inside, and have been painted on a white surface prepared for the purpose over the surface of the paintings, as is evident from the worn parts of it showing the paintings through. With a single exception all the engraved ones are outside; but they are mostly in so damaged a state that little information has hitherto been derived from them. High up on the façade of cave No. 10 there is an inscription in pure Lath character, which is considered as evidence that this cave is as old as the first or second century before Christ. The other inscriptions are mostly written in a character somewhat modified from that of the Laths. One, over the door leading into the right aisle in cave No. 26, is the most perfect of the whole, having ten successive lines in excellent preservation. It is thought to be of importance, and may possibly modify the present existing data for fixing the ages of the different caves, but its translation has not yet been given to the public.

The age of the caves, as determined by Mr. Fergusson, is from one century before the Christian era to the eleventh century after; whilst Dr. Wilson thinks they may range from the second or third century before our era to the fifth or sixth century after it. Whether any cave was begun and finished by the same set of workmen, or under the orders of one controlling mind, is unknown. It seems to be a growing opinion, however, that, as the first excavators left them, probably only the design was formed, the columns being left square masses, and that they were adorned and beautified by a subsequent generation,—a theory which may account for the capitals and bases of the pillars seldom extending beyond the diameter of the shafts.

The Ajanta caves are generally supposed to be purely Buddhistic; yet in the more modern ones, at least, there appear to be decided traces of Brahmanism: figures with four arms are found in two or three of the caves, and in cave No. 26 there are three distinct representations that seem intended for the fourth avatar of Vishnu. Yet these may not have formed a part of the original sculpture; indeed, they bear no signs of being integral, but may have been added subsequently, advantage being taken of a very unfinished portion of the cave.

Respecting the geological formation in which the caves have been executed, a friend of mine has supplied me with the following brief sketch:—

"The Cave Temples at Ajanta are cut out of fine compact trap-rock, which is in many places damaged by means of greenstone intersecting the rock at various angles. The caves containing cells or dwelling-places have been mostly cut out of hard trap-rock for seven or more feet from the trap; but the cave floor, being lower than the thickness of the hard stratum, is cut out of softer rock or tractyle.

"The soft portion of the rock has greatly decayed or disintegrated from the effects of the atmosphere and moisture upon it, and thus has caused many of the beautiful columns to crumble away.

"The strata in which the caves are cut, lie in a wonderfully horizontal position, considering the great convulsions which have evidently taken place here from igneous action.

"The tool with which the rock has been cut, appears to have been a punch, varying from a point to a quarter of an inch at the cutting end; the punch hammer seems to have been used in either hand as occasion required, or it suited the operator."

In order to lessen the greatness of the labour in excavating these caves, some have conjectured that the rock was formerly of so soft a nature as to admit of being worked with the pick-axe. This must have been suggested by the circumstance that the exterior surface of the rock is over-soft and friable. But this has resulted only from long exposure to atmospheric influences; the crispness and sharpness of detail in the sculptures could never have been produced on a soft material, which would have crumbled away beneath the chisel; moreover, as has been sufficiently proved in the many blasting operations that from time to time have been required, the deeper the rock is cut into the harder and more compact it becomes.

Buddhism as a definite form of religious doctrine was established by Sakya Sinha, or Gautama Buddha, who was born about 558 B.C. (or 623 according to the Singalese Annals) of Kshatrya blood, the son of Sudhodhana, the Rajah of Kopilavastu, on the borders of Nepaul, by his wife Maya, and claiming descent from the royal Solar race of Ikshwaku; at the age of twenty-nine, tired of the pomps and vanities of his father's court, he stole away, and in seclusion and the company of a few Brahmins he passed six years in the neighbourhood of Gaya, in Behar, in study and in the practice of the most rigid austerities. At length, unable to solve the enigma of evil, over which he brooded, and tired of these austerities, he adopted a less rigid course of discipline, when his few companions deserted him. At last, worn by long fasting and wrapt in meditation, he appears to have fallen into a trance, during which he seems to have imagined he received an intuitive illumination, whereby he attained all knowledge necessary for his high mission as a Buddha,—the Enlightened One. He was now in his thirty-fifth year,

when he went forth and preached his doctrines, and laboured to diffuse them for forty-five years; and at the age of eighty he obtained nirvana,—an absence from all sorrow or suffering or further transmigration. The Buddhists are divided into several sects and sub-divisions, of which some are theistic, some pantheistic, and others atheistic. The scriptures of the Nepaulese Buddhists, among whom are the only theistic Buddhists, are written in Sanscrit; those of the Singalese, who are atheistic, are in Pali. The theistic Buddhists, however, are few in number compared with the pantheistic. The theistic believe in a supreme being (Adi Buddha) and in a divine triad; but their God, having produced the powers who created the world, reposes in perfect quiescence, and does not concern himself about human affairs, which, when once they have received their impulse, go on in an even course without his interference; he does not estimate the value of human actions, and neither rewards nor punishes.

The atheistic sects maintain the eternity and self-existing and self-evolving matter; worlds are produced, upheld, destroyed, and reproduced by its inherent energies alone. The highest manifestation of this self-existing power is found in the development, at long intervals, in this and other worlds, of Buddhas, of whom there have been many. Some enumerate twenty-five who have already appeared in successive regenerations of the world; but they hold that no age or regeneration has yet been favoured with more than five. In the present world four have already appeared, the last of whom was Sakya Sinha or Gautama, the Buddha of the present age; and a fifth, Maitriya Buddha, is still expected.

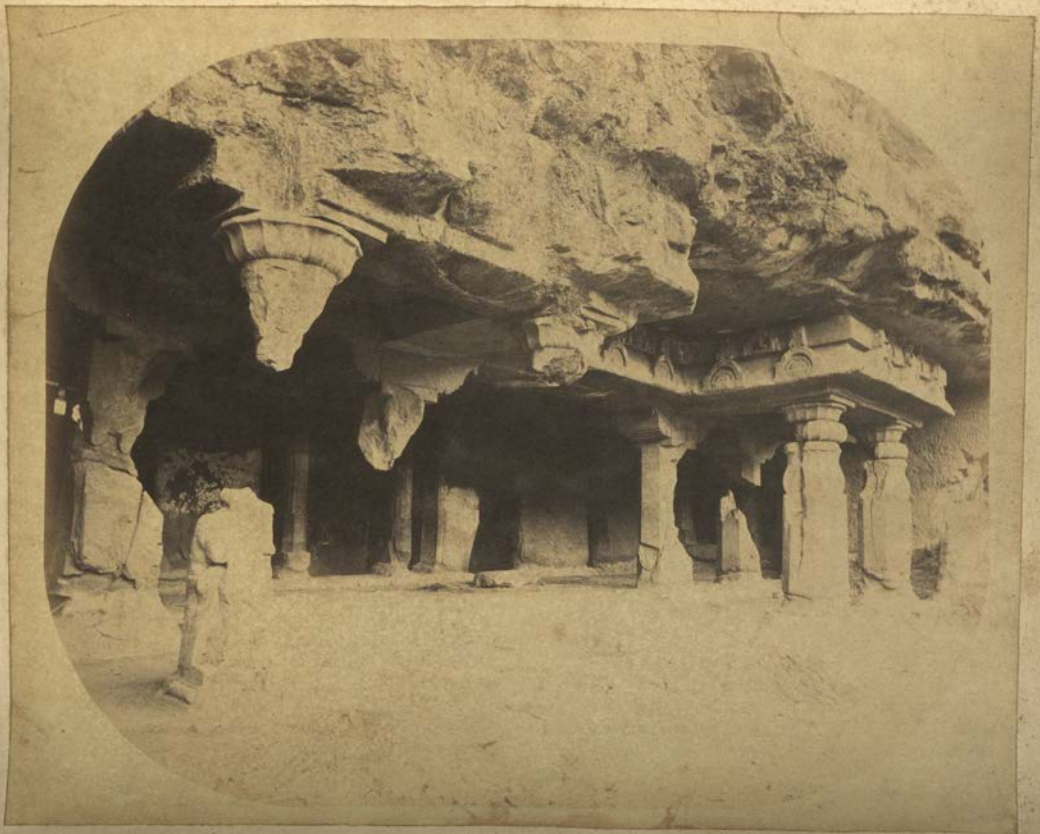
The Buddhists believe in metempsychosis, and allege that, as everything exists from natural causes, virtue brings its own reward and vice its own punishment, and that not only in the present but during all future states of being; and that the state of man is probationary only in so far as, if he is virtuous, he will, after death, attain to a higher state of being, perhaps even to a place in one of the lower heavens, but be born again many times; and as he may continue virtuous he will progressively ascend, according to the measure of virtue, to higher grades of bliss, till he finally reach perfection and attain nirvana, or cessation from all change and liability to transmigration. But, even after having been born a Deva in the highest heaven, he may, by neglect of duty or through ignorance, descend through thousands of grades of existence and come to suffer in the lowest hell. What is good the Buddhists believe to be the fruit of virtue; what is evil, of vice.

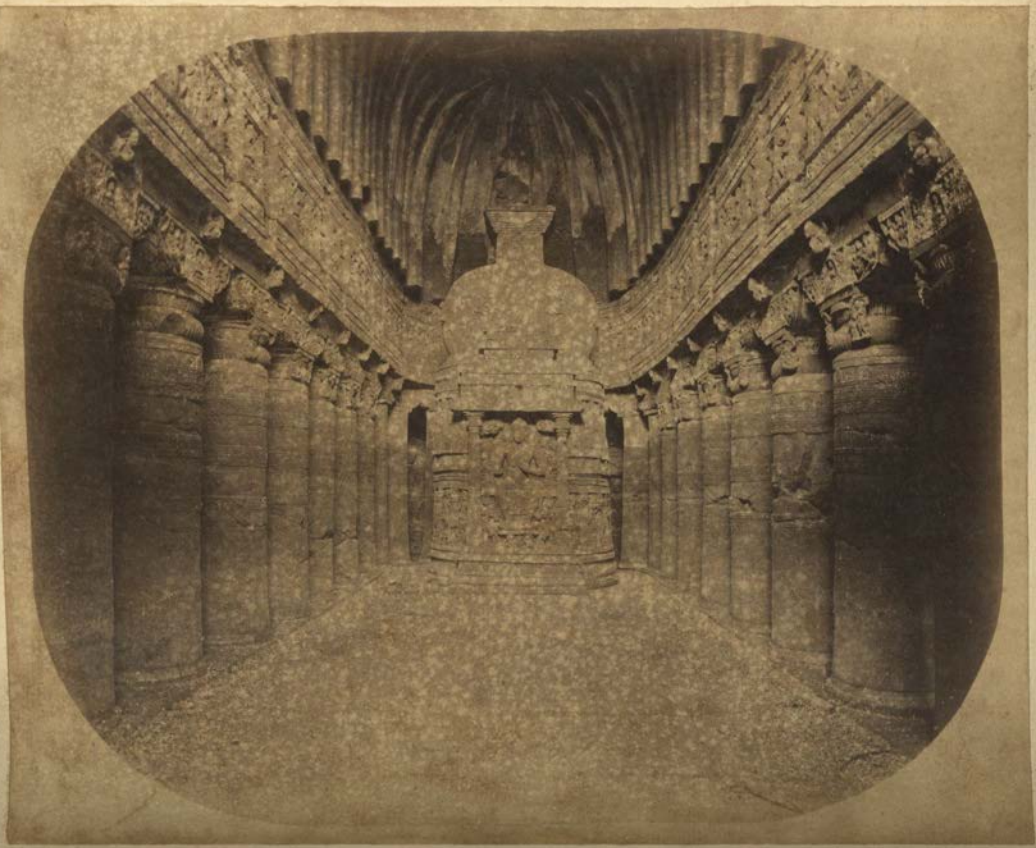
The doctrines inculcated by Buddha were those of virtue, justice, and benevolence. His commands were five, binding on everyone and to be repeated daily; for the more devoted they were increased to eight; and for ascetics and priests, to ten. The first five are considered necessary to salvation; the others are meritorious but not imperative. The five are: 1st, not to kill a living creature of any sort; 2nd, not to steal; 3rd, not to commit adultery; 4th, not to speak an untruth on any occasion; 5th, not to use intoxicating liquors or drugs.

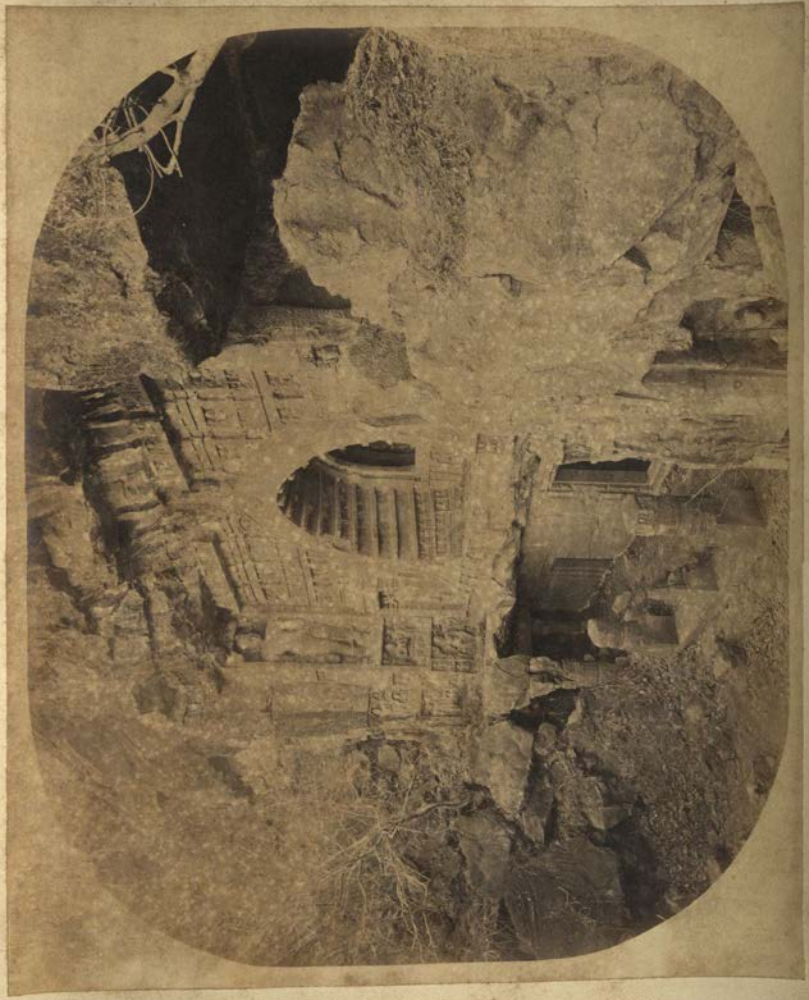
The practical teaching of Buddhism inculcates generally virtue, benevolence, and charity; the suppression of pride, covetousness, anger even under provocation, sarcasm and ill-natured retort, mischief-making; and emphatically sorcery and magic are forbidden, as are also idleness, love of pleasure, and finery.

The most remarkable feature of Buddhism is, not only that it is professed by the greatest portion of the human family, but that it has extended its doctrines among most of the other religious systems; the total amount of professors of Buddhism cannot be estimated at less than three hundred and eighty millions. The abolition of the cruel and abominable system of caste may have had something to do with this; for the religion of Buddha opened the gates of salvation to all, the Pariah as well as the Brahmin, the poor as well as the rich, the humble as well as the great. It arose, as already stated, in the N.E. of the Indian Peninsula, and flourished all over the country for about a thousand years; but about the sixth century A.D. the Brahmins made a combined and desperate attempt to suppress it, and, after long and bloody persecution of the heterodox sect, succeeded in driving them entirely out of India. It had early spread over Ceylon through Kashmir and Bactria, and over Thibet and Mongolia to the steppes of Siberia, whilst eastward it extended over Burmah and Siam, Java and the neighbouring islands, and through Japan and China.

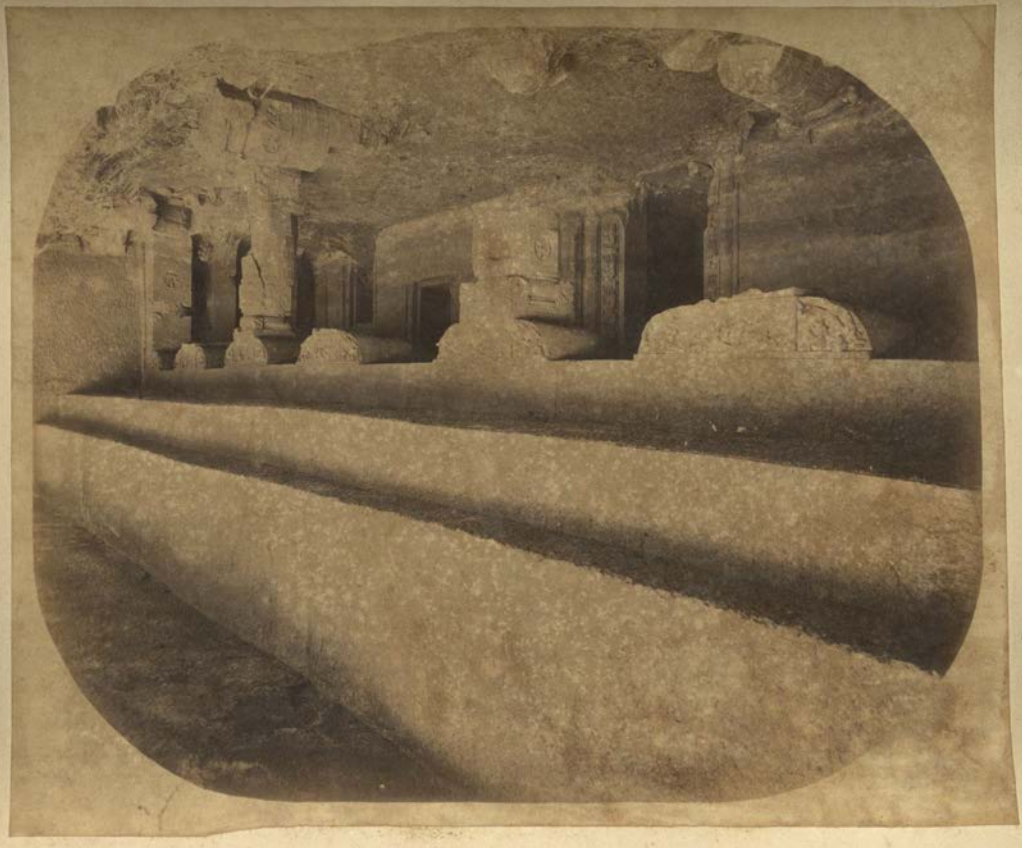
The above short epitomé of Buddhism has been collated for the benefit of ordinary visitors to the caves; for a more extended survey of the doctrines, metaphysics, literature, &c., of the Buddhists, consult Colebrooke's Essays, Vol. I., or translation Royal Asiatic Society, Vol. I. Turnour's Mahavanso; Hodgson's Illustrations, Hardy's Works, St. Hilaire's "Le Bhuddha", Vassileef's "Le Bhuddisma", the works of Burnouf, &c., &c.



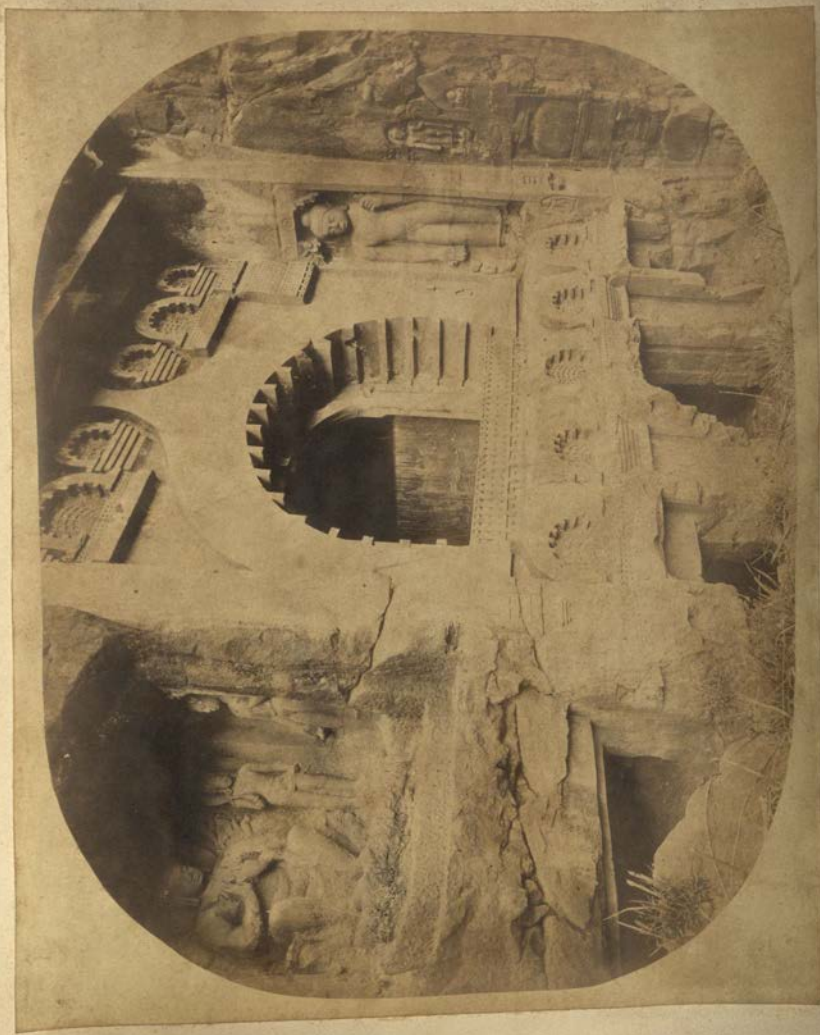




ROYAL ASIATIC SOCIETY
LIBRARY
OF THE
BOMBAY
BRANCH



109367



00109367

Digitized with financial assistance from
Observer Research Foundation
on 22 February, 2019